

S. S. H. Lie, M. Meuwese, M. Aussems and H. Joldersma, *Christine de Pizan in Bruges. Le Livre de la Cité des Dames as Het Bouc van de Stede der Vrouwen*. Hilversum: Verloren 2015 (Middeleeuwse Studies en Bronnen, 157). 128 pp, ill. (full colour) ISBN 978-90-8704-539-5. € 20.00.

After participating in an epistolary debate on the portrayal of women in Jan de Meung's *Roman de la Rose* (1401–02), Christine de Pizan wrote the *Livre de la Cité des Dames* in 1405 as a response to misogynistic writings of her time. In an allegorical prose, Christine criticizes the negative ideas on women by influential writers. After refuting these, she uses the life stories of remarkable women as building blocks to build a metaphorical city which serves as visual evidence of the virtuousness of women. The *Cité* became one of Christine's most popular and influential works (only surpassed by the *Episte Othéa*, a mythological treatise), extant in 28 French manuscripts and two translations: one in Middle Dutch, and one in English.

In the work under review, Orlanda Lie, Martine Meuwese, Mark Aussems, and Hermine Joldersma intend to put the manuscript of the Middle Dutch translation, and its relevance for a variety of disciplines, in the limelight. The translation, which was completed in Bruges in 1475, has not been unknown to scholars, but has received scarce attention. The authors rightfully state that the manuscript deserves a wider scholarly attention for several reasons: it is the only known translation of Christine's work in Middle Dutch, and a remarkably early translation for that matter – predating the English translation by 46 years. Moreover, the codex had an ambitious and inventive illumination programme, which unfortunately, remained largely uncompleted. Finally, although the translation seems to be relatively faithful to the original text, the translator did append two extra chapters in which he offers an interesting and unique perspective on the contemporary reception of Christine's work, as little is known of how the text was received outside French aristocratic circles.

Christin de Pizan in Bruges forms the first lengthy study of the *Bouc van de Stede der Vrouwen* and, as such, fills a clear gap in historiography (apart from the unpublished doctoral thesis of Miriam Oort (1986)). The authors focus on the background of the translation and its commissioner, the codicological aspects of the manuscript, the art-historical features of the illumination programme, and, lastly, the epilogue and its relevance for the reception history of the *Cité des Dames*. The actual study is relatively short in length (39 pages) and sometimes too concise: on several instances, a more profound exploration or argumentation would have been expedient, as well as a more intense interaction with existing studies. Furthermore, the work contains a bilingual edition of the epilogue of the translator

(fol. 329^v–333^r) in Middle Dutch and modern English. The study does not offer a critical edition of the *Stede der Vrouwen*. Fortunately, scholars interested in the text can complement this study with a diplomatic transcription available on DBNL (Oort and Versélewel de Witt Hamer 2008 (www.dbnl.org/tekst/pisa001nver01_01/index.php)). As a consequence, several questions on the transmission of the text remain unresolved, such as the relation of the translation to existing manuscripts of the *Cité des Dames*, a question on which differing hypotheses have been formulated by previous scholars (as acknowledged on p. 112), or the alterations made by the translator compared to the original text (discussed in Curnow 1975).

The first part of the study focuses on the commissioner, his social environment, and his motives for commissioning such a richly illuminated codex. Although there is no definite proof, the authors conclusively argue that the translation and the codex were commissioned by the same person: Jan III de Baenst, a member of a family that held important offices in the city governance of Bruges and had long-standing contacts with the Burgundian court. The authors point to three motivations of Jan de Baenst for commissioning the *Stede der Vrouwen* and its impressive codex. First, as is explicitly stated in the epilogue, the commissioner valued the work and its content, and he hoped it would edify women. This statement calls for a further exploration of the envisioned public of the text, but this issue is only superficially discussed. Furthermore, if the codex was commissioned for the personal library of de Baenst, it would have been useful to know more about the women in his family, but the familial situation of the commissioner is not discussed. Second, the richly illuminated manuscript suits the social profile of de Baenst, as a member of a family that emulated the nobility: by imitating the Burgundian court tradition of bibliophile patronage, the manuscript speaks for the social aspirations of the commissioner. The authors are less convincing when they attribute the third motivation of Jan de Baenst to the promotion of the Flemish language in a 'social rivalry [with] the French-speaking aristocrats', which would explain why he commissioned a manuscript that exceeded the number of the illuminations in the French versions of the text.

The codicological aspects of the codex and its illumination program form the second focus of the study. To support this, the illustrations of all 41 (partly) completed miniatures have been included. The authors refute earlier assessments, which qualified the illuminations as being of inferior quality, but acknowledge that although some of Bruges' most talented artists were involved (the master of Margaret of York and the master of the Dresden Prayer Book), they did not deliver their best work. However, the authors underline the significance of the illuminations by emphasizing that, while the miniaturists drew on various other illustration traditions as

visual models, they did not copy the illuminations but, instead, developed a new iconography. As said, the illumination program remained largely uncompleted. The authors offer a more convincing explanation than earlier research (Brinckmann 1997) for the unfinished state of the codex, by pointing to the life story of Jan de Baenst. After the death of Charles the Bold in 1477, Jan de Baenst found himself in a turbulent situation and was imprisoned. Subsequent financial misfortunes probably affected the work on the codex.

The third part of the study concentrates on the epilogue and on the translator, which offers a highly interesting perspective on the reception of the *Cité des Dames*. Because of lack of evidence, the authors remain inevitably speculative on the identity of the translator: they argue that he was probably a Latin-educated man or clerical author. There is, strangely, no discussion of earlier suggestions that the translator might have been Anthonis de Roovere (Viaene 1960; Oosterman 1995–96). The epilogue is characterized by the authors as a ‘negative note’, in which the translator voices an unfavourable opinion towards the work of Christine. In the first chapter of the epilogue, the translator summarizes discussions on the female authorship of the *Cité*, of which he reports that doubts have been raised by ‘others’. The author leaves the question unresolved, but concludes that the text is worthwhile reading as it will serve as a ‘mirror and model for all women’. He continues by describing why such a mirror is useful for women, but spends far more words on women’s sins than on women’s virtues, which stands in contrast with the original intention of the *Cité des Dames*. In a second chapter, the translator seems to explicitly express his own views. The authors argue that, by exaggerating Christine’s ideas to an absurd extent (stating, for example, that according to the text ‘all men [...] are not worth chaff’), the translator sarcastically undermines the work of Christine. This negative reading is further reinforced by the statement of the translator that her work is incomplete, which he corrects by offering an exposition of the (supposedly) missing theological arguments on the ‘privileges of women’. Although the authors acknowledge that the authorization of the epilogue remains unclear, they assume the views expressed differ from those of de Baenst, as the commissioning of such an ambitious codex would indicate a high appreciation of the work of Christine de Pizan. One wonders, however, if these two aspects are indeed conflicting: after all, Jan de Baenst commissioned the manuscript partly for edifying reasons, and the richness of the manuscript might be explained by his social aspirations. Surely, the ambiguous nature of the epilogue offers fruitful possibilities for research into the very layered reception of the work of *Christine* in various social environments.

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Taken together, by providing a clear and well written overview of the context of the *Stede der Vrouwen*, *Christine de Pizan in Bruges* fills its own aim to give this fascinating manuscript the limelight it deserves. This study, together with the diplomatic transcription, will hopefully serve as a stepping stone for a critical edition of the *Stede der Vrouwen*, as well as more studies on the manuscript, the context, and the reception of this intriguing translation.

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